THE LOST CONTINENT OF BERINGIA

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Many people have heard of the Lost Continent of Atlantis, that mythical land that was supposed to have existed long, long ago, and which, during a great cataclysmic upheaval, sank beneath the waters of some unidentified ocean.

Fewer people, however, have heard about the "lost continent" of Beringia, to some a mythical land that disappeared beneath the waters of the Bering and Chukchi Seas long, long ago. Yet, Beringia appears to be very much more real than Atlantis. For one thing, we know the location of Beringia. For another thing, there are parts of it which are still above water. Nevertheless, the story of how the "lost continent" of Beringia was discovered is a detective story of the first order.

Pieces of the Beringian puzzle actually existed as early as the late 1800s. Fossil bones of extinct elephants called mammoths had been found on Unalaska Island and the Pribilof Islands. Especially in the case of the Pribilofs, there was too much open water for the animals to have swum from the mainland of Alaska. In 1887, a scientist named Heilprin commented on the patterning in the distribution of plants and animals in both the Old and New Worlds. He observed that the plants and animals living in the tropics of the eastern and western hemispheres had very little in common. Those plants and animals living northward in the temperate zone differed much less. And the plants and animals living in the arctic were nearly identical in Eurasia and North America. The idea of some kind of land link laying to the north seemed likely. Others began to look toward the shallowly submerged continental shelf in the area of Bering Strait.

Then in 1937, a botanist named Eric Hultén coined the term Beringia. Dr. Hultén had been studying the geographic distribution of living plants. He noted a distinct east to west trend line in high latitude plants that centered roughly on the Bering Strait. He noticed that there were many identical or closely related species of plants that were found both in Alaska and in northeastern Asia. Some of these were found nowhere else in the world. There were just too many species to be accounted for by some accident such as a few seeds being transported over great distances by wind or birds. Dr. Hultén hypothesized that there must have once existed a land link between North America and Asia in the vicinity of the Bering Strait, across which were spread many of these plants and on which perhaps some of them evolved. He went on to hypothesize that during the Ice Ages, ice free portions of Alaska served as a refuge for many of these plants. To that hypothetical land link, he gave the name Beringia.

Other scientists began to map out the distribution of the massive ice sheets that blanketed much of the northern hemisphere during the Ice Ages, and to identify the mechanism that worked to expose the "Bering Land Bridge". In 1934, R. A. Daly popularized the concept that sea level fluctuated drastically during the Ice Ages.

Since the 1940s, many scientists have worked to unlock the mystery of Beringia by adding pieces to the puzzle. Their work has sharpened the clarity of the picture that we form in our minds of this long lost land. It is a picture of a large continental sized landscape centered in the vicinity of the Bering Strait. It stretched from the Mackenzie River in northwestern Canada, westward to the Kolyma River in northeastern Asia. It reached about 1,000 miles north to south, from the Arctic Ocean to the Aleutian Islands. It was a land mass that was home to a very unique array of plants and animals. And it served as the entry way for mankind to enter the New World.

However, mysteries remain. Conflicts occur over interpreting the few pieces of the puzzle that we are lucky to have. Still, scientists continue each year to slowly and painstakingly discover and piece together other clues that help tell more of the story and answer more questions.

To learn more about Beringia, read ***The Bering Land Bridge*** edited by David M. Hopkins, or ***Crossroads of Continents*** edited by William W. Fitzhugh and Aron Crowell. The National Park Service Offices in Nome and Kotzebue also offer a good place to start your exploration of the "lost continent."